The Hero-Trickster Discussion

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NOTES AND QUERIES

THE HERO-TRICKSTER DISCUSSION. — To account for the union of altruism and selfishness, or, at least, undignified waggery, in the character of North American culture-heroes, Brinton assumed that an originally lofty conception of these mythical beings had become debased with the lapse of time. This theory was rejected by Boas on the ground that it does not at all explain why there should be such a uniform tendency to attribute coarse buffoonery or moral delinquencies of the worst sort to an ideal culture-hero. The apparent difficulty, he indicated, vanishes with the misconception that actions which benefit mankind must have proceeded from an altruistic disposition. In reality, the heroes of Indian mythology are very often self-seekers, whose deeds have only incidentally contributed to man's comfort as well as to their own. Quite recently, Wundt, without referring to these earlier views, defends Brinton's thesis of the priority of the serious conceptions, but adds a psychological foundation of his own.[1] According to his mythological nomenclature, culture-tales fall under the category of legends (or their primitive representatives), which are defined as traditions crediting the origin of cultural possessions — and particularly of religious cults — to definite mythological beings (p. 126). That these eminently serious and sacred myths become associated with burlesque episodes clustering about the identical hero, is explained by the psychological law of contrast. The emotional tension produced by the serious plot must be relieved somehow (p. 130). "Je fester das Überlieferte geglaubt wird, um so leichter reizt es dazu an, den Kontrast der Gefühle in dem Wechsel von Ernst und Scherz zu entladen. So ist die Scherzlegende eine treue Parallele zu der bei primitiven Völkern den Zaubertanz ablösenden burlesken Pantomime oder auf späteren Stufen zu den Satyrspielen des griechischen Dramas oder endlich zu den komischen Episoden der mittelalterlichen Passionsspiele" (p. 48). This somewhat Hegelian synthesis of contradictories is far from convincing. It is not clear why the emotional strain must yield to a relaxation by *blending* heroic and ludicrous traits. Indeed, the separation of these characteristics in certain mythologies occurs, and seems inexplicable on Wundt's theory. Rabbit and Ictinike are distinct personages in Omaha mythology; why is the "law of contrast" inoperative in this case? Similarly, why are not the transformers of the Western Canadian Indians tricksters like the Coyote of the Plateau area? Why is it Uthlakanyana, and not Unkulunkulu, the creator and instructor of the Zulu, that figures as the hero of discreditable adventures?

When the data are fairly considered, there is no valid reason for regarding the buffoon as a mythological character of later origin than the more dignified hero. Wundt supposes that single episodes of a comical turn may gradually come to overgrow the original cycle, until the hero of tale or legend becomes an altogether clownish figure (p. 313). But in surveying the field of empirical facts, we are not very frequently presented with such a descending line of evolution. Not only is there no abstract psychological reason against assuming the coexistence of humorous tales at the very earliest stage of narrative

[1] "Völkerpsychologie: Eine Untersuchung der Entwicklungsgesetze von Sprache, Mythus und Sitte." Zweiter Band: *Mythus und Religion*, Dritter Teil. Leipzig, 1909.

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fiction, but we find a remarkably wide distribution for the trickster character, labelled here Reineke Fuchs or Jackal, there Coyote, and again bearing a human name, like the Cree Wisa'ketcak, or the Blackfoot Napi. The interesting point is that the serious culture-hero does not exist at all in the mythology of some tribes. The Dakota Unktomi is described by both Riggs and J. O. Dorsey as the incarnation of knavery; more precisely, he might be called an ideal representative of the pure trickster type. Yet there is no character in Dakota myth that could fairly be regarded as a culture-hero, and the hypotheses of his disappearance or degeneration must, of course, be rejected as gratuitous. The question arises, How do the Dakota account for the origin of their culture? Unfortunately, the available myths collected among the Dakota proper are not very numerous; but the character of the Omaha trickster and the Assiniboine tales recorded by the present writer shed some light on the subject.

The Omaha Ictinike is almost the exact counterpart of the Dakota Unktomi. Nevertheless we do find the origin of certain customs ascribed to his activity. The Assiniboine I^{n}kto^{n}mi is undoubtedly identical with the Dakota trickster; a great many incidents from the Wisa'ketcak cycle of the Cree have been incorporated into the story of his doings, but in almost all of these he remains essentially the same in character. For all that, it is to him that the Assiniboine attributes the sending-out of the "earth-diver" birds, the theft of summer for the sake of humanity, instruction in the killing and skinning of buffalo, and the allotment of dances to various animals with orders to pass them on to mankind. Some of these adventures display the transitional character described by Professor Boas. Thus, in the theft of summer, I^{n}kto^{n}mi is *hired* to steal the summer by promise of supernatural powers, and his methods savor of his usual craftiness. In some of the other cases, however, no egotistic motive is apparent.

The solution of the difficulty seems to me to lie partly in the theory of explanatory myths recently advocated in this Journal,[1] and, with special reference to biological explanations, by Wundt.[2] Granting the absence of a figure looming as a distinct culture-bringer and the overshadowing literary importance of the trickster, granting further the tendency to ascribe origins to definitely named and conceived personages, it seems to me the path of least resistance to attribute to the trickster the origin of whatever cultural possessions incite primitive curiosity. This hypothesis seems to account for the sporadic cultural achievements of the Omaha and Assiniboine trickster. At the same time, it is necessary to remember that another type of character may have an origin explanation attached to his myth, or that an origin myth may simply represent religious conceptions persisting to the present day. Thus in one Assiniboine tale it is the Poor Boy that devises the buffalo-park, while in another the calling of the buffalo is the gift of a waka^{n} female. Among the Blackfoot, the Old Man is to a certain extent a culture-hero; but he stands completely severed from the series of ritualistic myths, most of which seem to have been patterned after a single prototype. We are thus obliged to recognize that culture-origins may be secondarily attributed to various characters, and that the explanation of certain cultural features may assume a specific form (as in the last case cited), which could not be determined *à priori*. Even where the hypothesis here advanced seems applicable, the occurrence of diffusion may oblige us to shift our psychological explanation from the case at

[1] Vol. xxi, pp. 97–148, especially pp. 123–125.

[2] *L. c.* p. 183.

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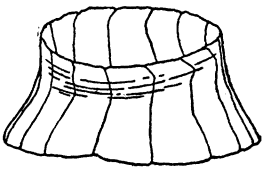
hand to the unknown original from which our version was ultimately derived. So far as my experience goes, tribes in very intimate contact with each other tend to equate their mythological heroes. Supposing that the Blackfoot first ascribed instructions as to the skinning of buffalo to their trickster, this would of course be an illustration of the present theory; but if the Assiniboine had picked up this item with others and transferred them to *their* trickster because they had come to regard Napi and Iⁿktoⁿmi as one, the psychology of this process would be naturally quite different.

In spite of these indispensable provisos, certain useful practical conclusions may be drawn from the foregoing considerations. The trickster may be an older type of character in a given mythology than a properly so-called culture-hero. It will be desirable to determine for every area whether a real culture-hero exists. If not, the next question will be to what extent the problem of the origin of culture has been attacked systematically, whether a stereotyped answer has been developed, or whether the problem has been solved piecemeal by associating definite cultural traits with already preëxisting mythological figures. In this way it will be possible to test to what extent the hypothesis here advanced is applicable.

Robert H. Lowie.

Transmigration in California. — Among the Indians of California, belief in transmigration is widespread. Most of the tribes say that the mythological beings whom they call "The First People" became animals or other natural objects before real people were created. The belief that existing people, after death, enter, or are transformed into animals, is less common. At the same time most of the Sierra tribes and some of those in Southern California hold that a large owl (usually the Great Horned Owl) makes a practice of capturing ghosts of the departed. This belief I have encountered from the Noto'koiyo or Northeastern Maidu southward to the Tejon and even to the To'ngvā of San Gabriel.

I was once asked by a Northern Mewuk if I had ever seen the broad belt of bony plates which surrounds the eyeball of the Great Horned Owl (see accompanying figure). On replying that I had, I was assured that these closely imbricating plates are the "finger-nails all jammed tight together of the ghosts caught by the owl."



The Northern Mewuk believe that the ghosts of good Indians turn at once into the Great Horned Owl (Too-koo-le) and remain this bird forever after; but that bad Indians turn into the Barn Owl (Et-tā'-le), the Meadow-Lark (Yu'-kal-loo), the Coyote (O'-lā-choo), or the Gray Fox (Choo'-moo-yah). Whatever mammal or bird an Indian becomes after death he continues to be forever — there is no change after that.

The Pā'-we-nan or Southwestern Maidu say that when a person dies his spirit (*oos*) goes out and may go into any one of a number of animals or things. It may turn into an owl or a coyote, a snake or a lizard; it may become a whirlwind,[1] or it may go into the ground and become earth; sometimes, but rarely, it goes off to a good place.

[1] The Northern Mewuk also say that whirlwinds and dust whirls are ghosts dancing swiftly round and round, and warn people to keep out of their way.

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